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**“Punk-Ass Book Jockeys”:  
Library Anxiety in the Television Programs *Community* and *Parks and Recreation***

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**Abstract**

Library anxiety, defined as the fear of using libraries, is a psychological barrier that impedes academic achievement and the development of information literacy. Using key episodes and protagonists from *Community* and *Parks and Recreation*, this paper will demonstrate how library anxiety is represented in these series. From the infamously manipulative public librarian Tammy Swanson in *Parks and Recreation* to the library as pillow fight battlefield in *Community*, these indications of anxiety towards libraries will be evaluated with the intent of illuminating current discourse in popular television regarding library use.

*What's really funny is we've been doing Q&A's about [Parks and Recreation], and people from local governments have said, "You guys nailed it about the library." We were just making it up as a joke on the show, but I guess everyone hates the library.*

Amy Poehler (Clare, 2011)

Three students meet in their library's group study room to prepare for their Spanish exam. It is early in their first semester, and the students are struggling to navigate their recent enrollment in a Colorado community college. "SHHHHHH....people are trying to study" is chalked in bold letters on the blackboard. A sign placed on an easel reads "Library Rules of Conduct. No..." with a long list of inscrutable text below. One of the students, Abed Nadir, comments, "Hey, this is kind of like *Breakfast Club*, huh?" and his study partner Britta Perry replies, "We *are* in a library." Abed: "Yeah, I'm sure each of us has an issue balled up inside that would make us cry if we talked about it." Britta: "Do you have something balled up inside of you?" Abed: "I've got a little doozy in the chamber if things get emotional." Abed later makes true on his word, reprising a poignant scene from John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club* (1985) that is set in a high school library. Within the first episode of the sitcom *Community*, the persistent theme of its characters' complex interactions with libraries is already established. Libraries have a long and well-documented history of appearances in film and television, manifestations that frequently are comprised of negative interactions or experiences. As with any given archetypal setting, the place of the library within these narratives both represents and influences the articulation of cultural values. Audiences recognize their own experiences *vis-a-vis* their active viewership, experiences which are in turn frequently affirmed and validated by the medium. The library has made recent resurgence as subject matter and setting in two acclaimed series, *Community* and *Parks and Recreation*, with elaborate portrayals in each. This paper investigates

the ways in which depictions of anxiety towards libraries in *Community* and *Parks and Recreation* are enacted. Prior to in-depth discussion it is instructive to provide a brief description of each program and the concept of library anxiety.

*Parks and Recreation* is a comedy series on NBC that debuted in 2009 and is currently in its sixth season. Set in the fictional location of Pawnee, Indiana, the series is led by Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler), a well-intentioned, perpetually cheery bureaucrat in the town's Parks Department. *Parks and Recreation's* ratings have been low compared to similar NBC comedy programs, in stark contrast to the critical acclaim and cult following the show enjoys. Similarly, *Community*, a series created by Dan Harmon that premiered in 2009 on NBC and has been renewed for a fifth season, benefits from an extremely engaged fan base and critical praise but struggles with low ratings. *Community* follows a group of students enrolled at the fictional Greendale Community College. Preceding discussion of these shows' implicit library-anxious tendencies, a theoretical framework to illuminate the nature of library anxiety will be of use.

### **The Anxious Library User**

Anxiety as an object of study dates from the late Eighteenth century, though it has likely been in existence as a psychological condition long before. In its general state, anxiety is described as "an emotional state with the subjectively experienced state of fear or a closely related emotion" (Endler & Edwards, 1982, p. 39). The experience of anxiety is highly subjective and has resulted in sometimes-conflicting definitions. There does exist an agreement on the three types of anxiety, which are behavioral, physiological, and phenomenological (Phillips, Martin & Meyers, 1972). As described by Raymond Cattell, general anxiety consists of two elements: trait anxiety and state anxiety. Trait anxiety is the intrinsic likelihood of an individual to react to a given stressful situation with anxiety, whereas state anxiety is a person's temporary emotional

state that is subject to variations over time. Symptoms of general anxiety frequently include fear, frustration, apprehension, or emotional instability. The consequences stemming from high levels of anxiety are highly situational, but are potentially manifested as sexual dysfunctions, excessive behaviors such as binge eating and alcohol abuse, and the exaggerated perception of threats to ego (Spielberger & Barratt, 1972).

The concept of library anxiety theorizes that being in or using a library poses a psychological obstacle that results in potential patrons being unable or unwilling to use the library and its services. As noted by Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (1997), key theorists in the area of library anxiety, the condition is characterized by negative emotions similar to those of general state-anxiety, including fear, confusion, disorganization, and feelings of uncertainty and dread as related to library use. More generally in regards to the nature and etiology of library anxiety, the condition can be described as “an uncomfortable feeling or emotional disposition, experienced in a library setting, which has cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioral ramifications,” a state not dissimilar to math or test anxiety (Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, & Lichtenstein, 1996, p. 152). The causes of library anxiety may be the result of several factors. The library appearing to be an intimidating institution for those unfamiliar with its rules and protocol is one plausibility. Similarly, the large size and complicated call-number based layout of many academic libraries has been cited as a contributing element, particularly for uninitiated students. A disinclination towards libraries stemming from a feeling of inadequacy when attempting to use library resources is an additional source of this state-based anxiety. Constance Mellon (1986), author of the first study to identify library anxiety, suggested that feelings of library anxiety result from one or more factors: (a) the relative size of the library, (b) lack of knowledge about the location of materials, (c) lack of knowledge about how to initiate library research, or (d) lack of knowledge about how to proceed with a library search. 75% to 85% of students from Mellon’s

study described feeling “fear or anxiety” or being “lost” regarding a research assignment requiring library use. More importantly, the students assumed that their classmates did not share a library skills deficiency, resulting in a feeling of ineptitude they were unwilling to reveal by requesting assistance (Mellon, 1986, p. 162). One student describes her feelings towards library use as such:

When I first entered the library, I was terrified. I didn't know where anything was located or even who to ask to get some help. It was like being in a foreign country and unable to speak the language. (p. 162)

Expanding on Mellon's research, Bostick (1992) delineated five dimensions of library anxiety to enable the measurement of library anxiety in students: barriers with staff (the perception of librarians or library staff as unapproachable or unhelpful), affective barriers (feelings of incompetence regarding library use), comfort with the library (concerns regarding safety and hospitality), knowledge of the library (familiarity with library functions and protocol), and mechanical barriers (use of equipment such as computers and printers). The implications for library anxious persons are far and wide. A lack of library use may result in decreased learning and a deficiency in lifelong information literacy skills. State anxiety has been proven to adversely affect learning and academic achievement (Ward & Salter, 1974), and Mellon's 1986 study of 6,000 undergraduates found a vast majority of students described their initial library experiences with anxiety related terminology. Because students with library-anxious tendencies experience interfering responses during the information seeking process these library users are unable to focus sufficient time and mental energy on a given process, a hindrance that poses greater challenges to their academic achievement.

### **Fear and Loathing in Libraries**

The intersection of libraries and popular culture benefits from consistent study by researchers, yet most work focuses on representations of librarians and the profession. These studies address the topics of the library's portrayal in key cultural works and the popular perception of library work as viewed on screen. Popular culture research fails to address library anxiety, a subject with major ramifications for how learners may experience the library and subsequently perform academically. To date, a vast majority of work examining popular culture and libraries focuses on the perpetuation of the librarian stereotype and the negative depiction of library workers. The most significant of these studies include Black, 1993; Williamson, 2002; Tancheva, 2005; Tevis and Tevis, 2005; and Seale, 2008. A majority of researchers, as described by Tancheva (2005), find that the image of the librarian is "overwhelmingly stereotypical and emphasizes negative features such as lack of imagination, dowdy appearance, excessive orderliness, indecisiveness, and, generally, a 'mousy' character" (p. 530). Apart from these traits, librarian archetypes can be categorized quite simply as the following: the old maid librarian, the incompetent librarian, the policeman librarian, the hero/ine librarian, and the librarian as parody (Seale, 2008, p. 2). One noteworthy exception to the common depiction of librarians is that of Rupert Giles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who, in DeCandido's (1999) estimation, "has done more for the image of the [library] profession than anything in the past 50 years" (p. 44).

Other studies have used cultural texts as jumping off points for critical analysis. Dill and Janke found *The Big Lebowski* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1998) to be a fruitful source for depictions of information seeking practices and how these actions are understood culturally outside of library settings. Most applicable to this paper, Radford and Radford (2001) explore "Libraries, Librarians, and the Discourse of Fear" and offer three themes found in the library's representation: library as cathedral, humiliation of the user, and the library policeman. The authors apply a Foucaultian analysis to the depiction of libraries in popular culture, arguing that

“fear is the fundamental organizing principle, or code, through which representations of libraries and librarians are manifest in modern popular culture forms” (p. 300) and, noting the same observation made in studies of library anxiety, that for library users the processes appear to be conducted via inconsistent or indecipherable modes. Tancheva (2005) observes, “being a repository of dead discourse, the library combines the grandeur of the church and the loneliness of the crypt and is understood through metaphors of control, tombs, labyrinths, morgues, dust, ghosts, silence, and humiliation” (p. 531). The librarian, frequently shown as an authority figure willing and able to dispense public embarrassment, combined with the quietude of the typical library building that can easily convey unease or trepidation, makes for an extremely uninviting scenario as conceived in popular cultural texts. Library anxiety, then, is the psychological state of being unable or unwilling to use a library due to a variety of potential elements rooted in feelings of helplessness or discomfort, and is characterized by negative emotions similar to general anxiety. A number of studies have documented that cultural texts typecast libraries and librarians as foreboding, oppressive, or obtuse. With the psychological construct of library anxiety and the classic portrayal of library stereotypes in mind, the discussion can turn to signs of library anxiety, both latent and manifest, within *Parks and Recreation* and *Community*.

### **Parks and Recreation: Political/Interpersonal War with the Library**

*Parks and Recreation*’s unique take on libraries is informed by its playfully contrarian stance towards certain government entities, thus creating humor by thwarting viewer expectations. The library is identified initially by central character Leslie Knope as a devious institution because the act of stating so, and indeed the ensuing plot line, is unorthodox. The library, better known as the first department in many municipalities to receive budget cuts in troubled economic conditions, is recast as possessor of political power and clout that other city



departments can only dream of. The public generally views libraries and librarians as wholesome public servants, and casting the institution in an opposite light produces a comedic effect in line with the incongruity theory of humor. However, a more nuanced reading can be achieved by examining the characters' roles and affectations, which reveals a far more negative stance towards the library than that of a simple role reversal. Two episodes in particular focus on the Parks Department's dealings with the Pawnee Public Library, which is a relationship unequivocally steeped in suspicion and fear.

The library is first presented early in Season Two (Scully, 2010). Leslie Knope receives notice that the Pawnee Public Library seeks to develop the same land as the Parks Department. The library's attempt to "steal" Lot 48—an intertextual link to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*—to construct a new branch is the crux of the episode. "Damn it, the library?" Knope asks in exasperation. To Knope, the library represents "the most diabolical, ruthless bunch of bureaucrats I have ever seen," a denunciation conducted over exterior shots of a quintessential stone library building. Later, upon learning this development, Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari) comments in disgust, "Punk-ass book jockeys." Ann Perkins (Rashida Jones) innocently poses the question, "Wait, why do we hate the library?" and Leslie responds with force: "The library is the worst group of people ever assembled in history. They're mean, conniving, rude, and extremely well-read, which makes them dangerous." This statement, followed by a reaction shot of Ann's surprise at this news, emphasizes the library's diabolical nature. Ann confides in the "documentary crew" filming the show that a library would be convenient to have close to her home, but she is wholly unable to express this sentiment with her anti-library coworkers. She thus adjusts her views to conform to that of her department, confiding in the meeting room to coworkers, however unconvincingly, that she hates the library. The library as place is established

as an anxiety-ridden site for all who value decency and reason, and to voice a conflicting opinion is tantamount to betrayal.

The Parks Department determines that the one person they know who works at the library is the Deputy Director of Library Services Tammy Swanson (Megan Mullally), Ron Swanson's (Nick Offerman) second ex-wife. Upon discovering this fact, Ron Swanson comments, "Of course, that bitch of an ex-wife is working for the library now, that is perfect. The worst person in the world working at the worst place in the world." This eminently detestable character is linked inextricably to her workplace. Tammy is identified by Ron as categorically nonhuman, a person without weakness, a robot "programmed by someone from the future to destroy all happiness." Onwuegbuzie, Jiao and Bostick (2004) suggest that the stereotypes and myths surrounding librarians as keepers of knowledge and the library as a feminine domain may play a role in negative perceptions of the library environment (p. 34-35). In this case, Ron Swanson's library anxiety stems from this association with his ex-wife and his perception of the library as secretive female-controlled territory.

Leslie Knope's cheerful predilection is in direct conflict with the antagonistic persona of Tammy Swanson. This is evidenced once Leslie arrives at Tammy's office, in which there are books on the "Approved" shelf (*Sperm Suicide*, *Man Putty*, *Woman War III*) and the "Rejected" shelf (*Power In Your Pants*, *The Male Brain—It's Bigger!*) that make apparent Tammy, and by extension the library, is operating in an ideologically-biased mode.

Leslie: "Hi, I'm Leslie Knope, I called a little while ago."

Tammy: "You have a lot of nerve showing your face here."

Leslie: "Excuse me?"

Tammy: "You have overdue books fees totaling three dollars, missy."

Leslie: “That is so typical. I should have known you’d use a low blow, dirty pool, B.S. move like that. That’s why everybody hates the library. Here, you know what, here’s your three dollars. I’ll see you in hell.”

Tammy stops Leslie, laughs, and explains that she was just kidding; Leslie had three dollars worth of fines but she had waived them. “We government gals have to watch each others’ back, right?” Tammy implores. “I know this is a trap but I don’t know how,” Leslie skeptically responds, shifting her gaze towards the camera as if to solicit sympathy and advice from viewers. Leslie is clearly confronting two of the dimensions of library anxiety identified by Bostick (1992), including barriers with staff and comfort with the library. Later in the episode Ron calls Leslie into his office, telling her to take the day off because the fate of the vacant lot holds no meaning. Leslie is immediately suspicious of Ron’s laissez-faire demeanor.

Ron: “[Tammy] made some really good points about libraries.”

Leslie: “Are you even listening to yourself? You’re defending the library now? Ron, the library. Of all the horrifying miserable things in the world.”

Ron: “Some people like libraries.”

Leslie: “I can’t even believe what I’m hearing, ‘some people like libraries.’ Ron, she’s in your head. You said that she was a manipulative monster and you were right.”

Ron: “She has all the power and I have nothing. I feel so little.”

Ron begins to weep, a truly rare occasion for the hyper-masculine character who in another episode boasts of only crying once as a schoolchild when he was struck by a bus. Ron is highly uncomfortable in this dominant and sexually-manipulative woman’s presence, which is, of course, rooted in a stereotypically female workplace. Leslie is incredulous that Ron is defending the library. One consequential factor identified by Jiao and Onwuegbuzie as contributing to library anxiety is low levels of hope in relation to overcoming obstacles to reach desired goals.

As Leslie faces the predicament of overcoming the library's plan to co-opt the vacant lot, her library anxiety is fueled by this threat. In Ron's office later, having confronted his librarian ex-wife and sharing a glass of whiskey with Leslie, Ron reminisces on Tammy: "Every time she laughs an angel dies. Even telemarketers avoid her. Her birth was payback for the sins of man. Buy you know, the worst thing about her?" "She works for the library," Leslie responds on cue. "She works for the library," Ron affirms, and they clink glasses in solidarity.

The library anxiety in Episode 14 of *Parks and Recreation* is rampant and far more insidious than the program's amiable atmosphere would first indicate. Leslie's despair at being unable to achieve her professional goals due to the library's intervention signals one type of library anxiety. Meanwhile, Ron suffers crippling anxiety due to Tammy, and by extension, the library's, power as a woman-dominated social sphere. "Ron and Tammy" proved to be a very successful episode, receiving positive reviews and the highest ratings up to that point in the season, and the pairing of Nick Offerman with his real-life wife Megan Mullally was repeated early in Season Three. The continuation of Ron and Tammy's torrid association, titled "Ron and Tammy: Part Two" (Kapnek, 2011), opens with Ron receiving in-person notice from the Comptroller's office that he has an outstanding debt from the Pawnee Public Library for the book *It's Not the Size of the Boat: Embracing Life with a Micro Penis*. "Tammy," he smiles knowingly. Upon visiting Tammy's office, Ron is unswayed by Tammy's sexual advances and overt innuendos. Tom Haverford later appears at a bar with Tammy Swanson where both are seeking retribution against Ron. Leslie, in an aside with the false camera crew, comments plainly, "I know Tammy seems scary, but really she's just a manipulative, psychotic, library-book-peddling, sex-crazed, she-demon." This characterization of the Deputy Director of Library Services remains steadfast throughout the program, and there remains not a single personage

whom is sympathetic towards Tammy. If anything, the level of anxiety towards Tammy and the library rapidly escalates.

Along with considerable dialogue devoted to Tammy and the library, the episode's climactic scene transpires in the Pawnee Public Library. The library building and its interior layout, major forces in the development and subsistence of library anxiety according to Mellon, are presented for the first time in the series. Tammy is with Ron and her female coworkers for a bridal shower held in the library's reading room after-hours. After Tammy receives a new library card for "Tammy Swanson Swanson" that garners big laughs from her colleagues, Tom Haverford rushes in and informs Ron that Tammy does not have his best interests in mind. Tammy swiftly responds by viciously beating Tom and throwing him into a bookshelf, laughing maniacally while Tom attempts to steady himself amongst the disarrayed books. Everyone in attendance is shocked by Tammy's outburst as she continues her assault by striking Tom with a book. Ron comes to the re-realization that Tammy is in fact a monster, picking on this "pathetic defenseless little man." Suffice to say, if Tom did not suffer from library anxiety previously, he does after this incident, and Ron's attitudes towards Tammy and the library have been reaffirmed. The episode concludes with a scenario reprised from the denouement of Season Two's "Ron and Tammy" episode when Tammy last appeared. Ron and Tom sit in Ron's office, drinking whiskey and reflecting on recent events, thereby linking to the earlier text that featured Ron and Leslie in the same scenario.

When asked in an interview, "How much does *Parks and Recreation* hate the library?" Amy Poehler responds:

The library represents that branch of government that's like the smart kid—the teacher's favorite. And the library always wins. They get whatever they want. Everybody loves them—nobody can say anything. People who work in the library think they are so much

better than everyone else. And what's really funny is we've been doing Q&A's about our show, and people from local governments have said, "You guys nailed it about the library." We were just making it up as a joke on the show, but I guess everyone hates the library. (Clare, 2011, par. 13)

In a separate interview, Poehler mentions: "That interdepartmental squabbling is really fun to play. I love that in our show, everybody hates the library. The library was built by these sharks that are just people that will slit your throat if you're not looking. When everyone's running for city councilor, we have a lot of stuff about how everybody wants to get rid of the library" (Chaney, 2012, par. 24). While it is evident Poehler's comments are being made facetiously, they remain indicative of a latent library anxiety that lies beneath the surface of the series. After all, a deep-rooted library anxiety that materializes among audiences during question and answer sessions regarding the show can be more significant than one expressed by the program's writers. It is clear that high levels of library anxiety are embedded within *Parks and Recreation's* episodes as well as outside the program as in interviews and public forums. *Community*, another NBC sitcom that debuted in 2009, takes a different approach to its characters' associations with library use due in part to the centrality of the library to the show's setting and storyline.

### **Community: Library as Friend and Foe**

The library has a fundamental role in *Community*, serving as central meeting place for the Spanish study group and as setting for several of the program's thematic episodes. *Community's* protagonists congregate in Library Group Study Room F, which show creator Dan Harmon describes as akin to the "Cheers table" or the "Star Trek bridge"; an environment shared by the characters that signals their life challenges (Commentary, Pomerantz, 2010). Group Study Room F is a large cavernous space with bright florescent lights and dozens of flyers posted on the

walls. Even this setting, a frequent setting receiving a great deal of screen time, displays attributes that divulge a library anxiety. The decor features an easel with a sign reading, “Library Rules of Conduct: NO...” and a long list of unreadable text following, which appears in the pilot and remains in many subsequent episodes. The chalkboard reads, “YOU MAY NOT USE THIS ROOM WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL FROM THE FRONT DESK!!! THANK YOU” very early in the series (Harmon, 2009) and later messages detail appropriate procedures for reservation or use of the study room. These visual cues give the subtle but unequivocal impression of the library as an institution fixated on rules and control, thereby invoking three dimensions of library anxiety: knowledge of the library, affective barriers, and comfort with the library. This library anxiety is not limited to the group study room. Each character has a complex relationship with the library and research, in particular Jeff Winger (Joel McHale) and the duo of Abed Nadir and Troy Barnes (Danny Pudi and Donald Glover).

Jeff Winger is a disgraced lawyer fired from his firm after it was found he fabricated his credentials, and is now forced to earn a legitimate degree at Greendale Community College. In 1997 Jiao and Onwuegbuzie identified several elements that contribute to library anxiety, three of which apply directly to Jeff: socially prescribed perfectionism, academic procrastination, and inappropriate study habits. Jeff’s strong ego, resentment of his newfound status, and desire to avoid work at all costs are all established in the first episode of *Community* (Harmon, 2009). In it, Jeff attempts to obtain test answers from his friend Professor Ian Duncan (John Oliver) whom he successfully defended against a DUI charge. Professor Duncan gives Jeff a manila envelope, which to the student’s chagrin contains a sheath of empty paper with only one word written on the last page: “Booyah.” Despite the professor’s clever attempt to teach a lesson to the academically dishonest student, old habits die hard. Two seasons later Jeff puts his attitude towards research and academic achievement in no uncertain terms: “I’m no sociopath. I’m just a

guy that doesn't like taking tests, doing work, and getting yelled at. So if you think about it, I'm the sanest person here" (Harmon, 2012). Jeff's library-anxious behaviors are manifested in a similar manner in "Introduction to Film" (Hobert, 2010), wherein he seeks out and finds what he believes to be the "ultimate blow off class" with a professor who "thinks he's in *Dead Poets' Society*" due to the professor's obsession with seizing the day. Jeff, as usual, spends more time scrounging for an easy "A" than it would take to do the assignment, but his strong feelings of uncertainty towards academic work are key. Gross and Latham (2007) state:

Information seeking typically begins with a sense of uncertainty. Researchers have found that individuals cope with strong feelings of uncertainty, especially during the initiation of a project. Competency theory, developed in the domain of psychology, suggests that people who lack competence tend not only to be unaware of their lack of ability, but to overestimate what they can do. (p. 336)

"Overestimation" precisely summarizes Jeff's personality. He is frequently overconfident of his abilities, whether in his studies or interpersonally. The library study group, a creation of Jeff's, was a ruse to become closer to his potential love interest. Most indicative of all is that for a student who spends considerable time in the library pursuing his personal matters, none of it consists of utilizing library resources or conversing with staff. Troy and Abed, two other members of the study group, enjoy a healthy relationship with the library that Jeff does not have the benefit of.

The literature has established it is a student's perceived ignorance about how to use the library, as opposed to an actual lack of knowledge, that is the determining factor at the root of library anxiety. Any student can suffer from library anxiety, but those who are more susceptible tend to be male, young, and in their first year as a student (Carlile, 2007). By these criteria one might assume that former high school football star Troy and pop-culture obsessive Abed, young



male students new to Greendale Community College, are particularly vulnerable. Yet both students exhibit a level of comfort in the library that illustrates a propensity towards library use far more advanced than their study group peers. Troy and Abed's Spanish rap song that concludes the second episode of the series (Harmon, 2009) is the first display of the duo's high degree of comfort in the library, as it conveys their proactive ability to spend academically productive as well as social time in the building. More than any other characters Troy and Abed appear in Group Study Room F, where it serves as their third place. When their apartment is fumigated the two install their bunk bed in the group study room, sleeping there a week after the fumigation is completed due to their natural comfort in the library (Ganz, 2012). The pair also hosts an imaginary morning news TV program in the library. Troy and Abed's intimate knowledge of the library is informed by substantial time spent studying. As Jiao and Onwuegbuzie (1997) confirm, "levels of library anxiety may be influenced by a student's reason for using the library. Students who use the library to study for a class project tend to report lower levels of anxiety stemming from barriers with staff [and] affective barriers" (p. 383).

*Community* being a series which relies heavily on meta-commentary to transmit its singular humor, Troy and Abed's relation with the library—in this case, a librarian—and each other is tested in one text centered on the "sexy librarian" trope (Dornetto, 2011). In this Valentine's Day-themed episode, Mariah—a direct reference to *The Music Man*'s prim and proper librarian-love-interest Marian—makes an appearance as potential date for Troy and Abed, complete with requisite glasses, a pencil behind her ear, and a revealing top. The episode commences with a conversation with Troy and Abed, hunched conspiratorially in the study room and observing Mariah from across the room. Troy asks, "Why does being a librarian make her even hotter?" and Abed, ever analytical and shrewd, answers, "They're keepers of knowledge. She holds the answers to all of our questions. 'Will you marry me?' and 'Why are there still

libraries?’” Abed yells “books!” from across the room to attract Mariah’s attention. In keeping with *Community*’s brand of levity, the use of the sexy librarian trope is a commentary in itself that prompts viewers to reevaluate the stereotype while enjoying the sense of recognition. This ironic restaging and undermining of the librarian stereotype was tackled in *Party Girl* (Daisy von Scherler Mayer, 1995) as the protagonist Mary questions the time-honored portrayal’s authority, in turn “highlight[ing] the status of the old maid as a representation by throwing the mechanics of how meaning is produced into sharp relief” (Adams, 2000, p. 295).

The library anxiety in *Community* is conveyed in a winking manner consistent with the series’ meta-humor. While one protagonist, Jeff Winger, is clearly library-anxious, and the study room provides visual cues signifying a traditional library’s obsession with policies and procedures, Troy and Abed have a positive relationship with the library as a space for study, extracurricular activities, and socialization. The library anxiety displayed in *Community* is thus less simplistic than *Parks and Recreation*’s use of overtly negative reactions to an institution that is commonly perceived as a public good.

## Conclusion

Despite it being a condition ripe for staging comedic moments, library anxiety remains a very real and debilitating state that can result in decreased academic achievement and a deficiency in information literacy, and is often characterized by negative emotions in relation to libraries including fear, confusion, disorganization, and apprehension. Library use as a psychological hurdle is reflected in dozens of televisual texts that regularly typecast libraries in negative terms. One method of combating overtly detrimental portrayals of libraries and library anxiety specifically is via library instruction courses. Students who have received a library orientation or more advanced instruction in locating information “tend to report experiencing less

affective barriers and feeling more comfortable with and knowledgeable about the library,” suggesting that library instruction sessions are effective in developing student research skills and aid the progress of affective aptitudes (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1997, p. 383).

*Parks and Recreation* and *Community* relate library-anxious protagonists and situations to viewers via each series’ unique sense of humor. This operational mode enables library anxiety to be depicted with far more complexity than in other televisual texts as viewers are asked to evaluate the library’s representation in relation to the shows’ meta-commentaries on genre, filmic tropes, and more. Thus, in “Critical Film Studies” (Panos, 2011) the library as place is reconsidered alongside a series of other popular culture reference points, including Abed’s *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) themed surprise party. Future research exploring the intersections of contemporary popular culture and libraries should investigate the ways in which media consumers relate to libraries *vis a vis* specific genres, authors, or texts, an aim which was out of the scope of this paper focusing on the representations of library anxiety as expressed by two sitcoms.

Above all, *Parks and Recreation* and *Community* take compelling risks in terms of audience expectations. “As these shows and others like them develop,” Detweiler (2012) writes regarding *The Office* and other post-millennial sitcoms, “genre expectations will be stretched and mediated, exploiting irony and sentiment in ways not yet seen” (p. 745). These programs thus signify a portrayal of libraries that is no longer content to remain within established bounds, an exciting development for librarians and viewers alike.

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